

## The books that inspired Raewyn Connell: “Juliet Mitchell’s Woman’s Estate had the energy and passion of the liberation movement”.

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*Raewyn Connell is an Australian sociologist best known for her highly influential contributions to studies of the social construction of masculinity. She was one of the founders of this research field and her book *Masculinities* (1995, 2005) is the most-cited in the field. Raewyn shares how the Vietnam War inspired her to become a social scientist and how Australian poetry shaped the way she came to see the world, and suggests three books we should be getting copies of.*



It wasn't any book that inspired me to become a social scientist, it was the state of the world. I was a student at the University of Melbourne in the mid 1960s, doing History and Psychology honours. The book that impressed me most was Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution*, a wonderful exercise in piecing together historical reality from a mass of tiny fragments of data. However it was pure empiricism, and increasingly I thought that the skills we were being taught, with so much effort, had no significance in the wider world.

Meanwhile the wider world was going up in flames. Literally: the Americans were dropping napalm on peasants in Asia and the right-wing Australian government was egging them on. Things haven't changed much, except that now they do it with drones. I wanted to work in fields relevant to changing a world where that could happen, and therefore I moved towards politics and sociology.



Of course I was reading furiously, before, during and after that move. There's a risk of mythologising, looking back; but I can name some books that became dog-eared or broken-backed. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, a passionate essay about race relations in the USA. Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Jacobs and Landau's *The New Radicals*, documents from the New Left in the USA. Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, and a little later his *Essay on Liberation*, now forgotten but for me connecting serious theory with personal politics in a powerful way. George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* about his experience in revolutionary Spain, an unforgettable picture of socialism as something you do, rather than something you dogmatise about.

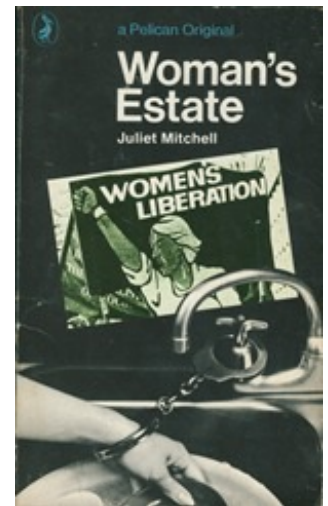
Now: all of these are from Europe or North America, and all of them are blokes, and to be honest, all of this stuff is rather blokey. Like most other students in the global periphery, whether on the Left or the Right, I was being inducted into the patriarchal intellectual culture of the global metropole.

However other writing, still by blokes, held other possibilities. I began reading Freud as a teenager, and in my Psych courses, thanks to two humanist teachers, I read more. I discovered the wonderful case studies, especially the *Wolf Man*, and the unpacking of human emotions in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. In 1970 my partner and I travelled for a year to the USA, the usual pilgrimage of young intellectuals from the periphery. In the bowels of the University of Chicago's splendid library I

discovered Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*, and then went backwards and forwards through the rest of Lévi-Strauss. Well, this wasn't political except in the sense that it was anti-racist. But it showed a first-class thinker coming to terms with multiple cultures and a vast array of data, with powerful – though I now think misguided – theoretical tools.

It wasn't only academic and political writing that shaped the way I was coming to see the world. Judith Wright is a central figure in Australian poetry and was a pioneer of green politics and reconciliation between whites and Aboriginal people. I have the 1964 printing of her *Five Senses* and still get carried away by its treatment of land, love, trees, children. Yeats, especially the late poems; Donne, especially the early ones; Voznesensky's *Antiworlds*, through the fog of translation. And Allen Ginsberg, whose poem *Howl* I once read to the audience of an inner-city theatre, backed by a band playing twelve-bar blues. Social critique with an impact I've never had since...

By the early 1970s there were books coming out of the new feminism. The one that most influenced me was Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate*, which had the energy and passion of the liberation movement without the showing-off that marred other well-known books of the time. It had a solid base of fact and it began to do what few had then done, build an understanding of how patriarchy worked as a social order. I was a little disappointed when Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, a few years later, moved towards formalism. A more robustly historical and dynamic picture of gender came from two important Australian books of the early 1980s: Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle's *Gender at Work*, based on several industry studies, and Jill Matthews' *Good and Mad Women*, a subtle analysis of the social construction of femininity and the impossibilities it created for women's daily living.



Those are books that got me going. Not many were formally “sociology”, and I don't think that matters at all. What matters is that I read widely, and debated with what I read. If students now can do the same through the Internet, then good for them!

What do I read in my spare time? Bad murder mysteries, that I find in second-hand bookshops. Poetry by women, to redress the early blokes; recently, Gabriela Mistral, Rosemary Dobson, Margaret Atwood. History, especially what I can find about WWII that isn't in the heroic-defenders-of-liberty genre. A bit of popular science, in the hope of catching up with the twentieth century at least. The finance pages of the newspapers, to find out what's happening in my own country.

From the last five years, one 'must-read' book? Well, sociology has been so badly served by creating canons that I hesitate to say that anything is a must-read. But here are three books I would very much *like* people to read.

*Reframing Masculinities*, edited by the Indian sociologist Radhika Chopra, is a great example of engaged social science. It's about men involved in gender reform, bringing together narratives from across India: a teacher in a village school, a community development practitioner, and so on. It has lessons for gender researchers and for activists, in India and abroad.

Wendy Harcourt's *Body Politics in Development* is a beautifully clear and reflective synthesis of gender and sexuality issues on a world scale – health, care, childbirth, sexuality, violence, technology. It has a broad vision but it's also grounded in gritty reality and practical know-how; a good antidote to the rather precious tone of deconstructionist gender studies in the metropole.



Body Politics in Development  
Critical debates in gender and development

Finally, see if you can find Margaret Somerville and Tony Perkins, *Singing the Coast*, jointly written by an Aboriginal activist and a white academic. An

indigenous leader has called it “one of the most beautiful and important books to enter our world in recent time”, and I think she is right. This is about indigenous knowledge, survival under the devastation of colonization, kinship, place, story, and walking on the beach. Extremely good writing; almost impossible to describe; but again, engaged social science, opening both intellectual and practical horizons.

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**Raewyn Connell** is University Professor at the [University of Sydney](#). Her most recent books are *Southern Theory* (2007), about social thought beyond the global metropole; *Gender: In World Perspective* (2009); and *Confronting Equality* (2011), about social science and politics. Her work has been translated into sixteen languages. A long-term participant in the labour and peace movements, Raewyn has tried to make social science relevant to social justice. Her website is at [www.raewynconnell.net](http://www.raewynconnell.net).

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